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Wisdom and Reason

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On Ryan's (2012) theory of wisdom as deep rationality, to believe or act wisely is to believe or act in a justified way, informed by a body of other justified beliefs about the good life. Ryan (2017) elaborates the view along evidentialist lines: one's belief or act is justified when it is based on the best available evidence. The resulting package faces counterexamples. Transformative experiences are rational 'leaps of faith' (Paul 2014), so the agent's decision to undergo one is not best supported by the evidence available. Many transformative experiences (such as deciding to become a mother, or choosing a career path) often endow lives with meaning, and agents with a sense of purpose (Wolf 2010). Because so much is at stake, it is sometimes rational for agents to take on the risk involved in transforming themselves. Deciding to undergo such experiences may be wise—even if the evidence available at the time doesn't positively support that decision. In reply to this challenge, I argue that, instead of evidentialism, Ryan's view should include virtue theory, which helps explain the seeming counterexamples. I focus on the virtues of openness to experience, and of steadfastness in the face of experience.

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1. Introduction

What is wisdom? Sharon Ryan (2012) has advanced an influential theory on which wisdom is deep rationality. According to her view, to believe or act wisely is to believe or act in a justified way, and informed by a body of other justified beliefs about moral, emotional, and practical affairs. (These are beliefs needed to live well.) As Ryan (2017) elaborates, to believe or act justifiedly, in turn, is to believe or act based on the best available evidence.

Here is a reason in favor of Ryan's view. The view is intuitively compelling because it is procedural. It contrasts with success views, according to which being wise presupposes knowledge of how to live well,

and enacting that knowledge in actually living well. Success views of wisdom fail to accommodate the widely recognized fact that sages can find themselves in adverse circumstances, and wisdom may be a “burdened virtue” (Tessman 2005): a virtue that shines through precisely when things go wrong. When things go awry, we may still say someone acted (or thought) wisely in case they have nothing to reproach themselves. That is, they acted (or thought) in a justified way, a way that withstands reflective scrutiny.

In this text, I raise, and then respond to, an important objection to Ryan’s view. Ryan (2017) advocates, as part of her view of wisdom, an account of rationality as justification, and an evidentialist account of justification. The resulting package, I argue, faces important counterexamples. The counterexamples are some transformative experiences. As Laurie Paul (2014) conceives them, transformative experiences are rational ‘leaps of faith’. If so, then the agent’s decision to undergo them is *not* best supported by the evidence available in that decision situation, *contra* Ryan’s evidentialism. Many transformative experiences (such as deciding to become a mother, or choosing a career path) often endow lives with meaning, and agents with a sense of purpose (Wolf 2010). A lot is at stake in deciding to transform oneself. Because so much is at stake, it is sometimes rational for agents to take on the risk involved in deciding to transform themselves. Deciding to undergo such experiences may be wise—even if the evidence available to the agent at the time doesn’t positively support that decision.

I respond to this challenge. Ryan’s view of wisdom as deep rationality shouldn’t be abandoned. But its evidentialist component should be renounced. A better companion for Ryan’s deep rationality view of wisdom, plus her justification view of rationality, is a virtue theory of thinking and acting well. This, I argue, can help explain the seeming counterexamples to Ryan’s view coming from transformative experiences. Suppose we take acts and thoughts to be rational inasmuch as they exercise skills and virtues their agent possesses. (This is how Zagzebski (1996) characterizes justification.) Then deciding to undergo transformative experiences—or not—may be rational in many circumstances: whenever one appropriately, and carefully, exercises one’s virtues of openness to experience, or, respectively, steadfastness in the face of experience. Virtue theory comes to the rescue of Ryan’s view of wisdom as deep rationality.

2. *Wisdom as deep rationality*

In a nutshell, here is Sharon Ryan’s theory of wisdom as deep rationality:

A person *S* is wise iff (1) *S* has a wide variety of epistemically justified beliefs on a wide variety of subjects that are central to a good liberal arts education, as well as morality, practical matters, and matters of the heart, (2) *S* has very few unjustified beliefs and *S* is sensitive to his or her limitations,

and (3) S is deeply committed to learning more about the topics noted in (1) and living a life that reflects what S is justified in believing (2017: 117).

I will articulate, defend, and then respond to an important objection to Ryan's view in what follows. But I start by saying what makes her view intuitively compelling. Addressing both support and objections will clarify some of the central concepts of Ryan's view: what it is to be rational, what commitment consists in, and how wise thoughts and wise deeds cohere.

Ryan's view of wisdom as deep rationality is well-supported. It does justice to the fact that wisdom is most striking in adverse circumstances when, even if the sage has nothing to reproach herself, the outcome is not ideal. And Ryan's view also does justice to why the sage's thoughts and deeds cohere (to the extent that they do—which is also the extent of one's wisdom).

The core idea Ryan proposes is that of deep rationality. When is rationality *deep*? Ryan explains that it:

requires that one be deeply committed to seeking out new ideas, becoming more educated, and testing one's own theories against all of the best evidence available... Furthermore, it requires the wise person to put his or her justified beliefs into practice. The theory requires the wise to be deeply committed to having appropriate emotions, treating others morally, and having successful strategies for getting through the trials and tribulations of life, etc. (2012: 109)

Ryan's conception of deep rationality depends on her view of rationality. When are thoughts or deeds *rational* in the first place? As she clarifies:

I am going to focus on one, purely epistemic, sense of rationality. Epistemic rationality should be understood in terms of epistemic justification. I endorse an evidentialist theory of epistemic justification. (2017: 116–17)

That is, beliefs are rational when justified. Acts, presumably, are rational when the decisions to perform them are justified. To be justified is to be best supported by evidence (against countervailing evidence, if any there be).

Ryan (2017) lays great emphasis on evidentialism. However, I will now argue that this evidentialist construal of justification faces counterexamples: decisions which are not best supported by evidence, but which we would ordinarily often deem wise.

3. *Transformative experiences*

Consider what Laurie Paul (2014) calls *transformative* experiences: becoming a mother, choosing a career path, undergoing surgery to install a cochlear implant or a sensory substitution system so that one may perceive the world differently, undergoing a mystical experience of religious conversion, or abruptly quitting an addiction. Sometimes, undergoing a transformative experience changes one's life for the better, endowing it with meaning, and the experiencer with a sense of pur-

pose unsuspected before. In those cases, deciding to transform oneself is wise, or so we would ordinarily think. This is despite the fact that such decisions cannot be best supported by evidence in their favor. As Paul (2014) explains, they often amount to rational leaps of faith.

I will now argue that Ryan's view of wisdom, coupled with her evidentialism, faces a large class of counterexamples. If wisdom is deep rationality, and if rationality is justification, and if justification is evidentialist, then wise thoughts and deeds are, necessarily, those which are best supported by evidence. Deciding to undergo transformative experiences is sometimes a counterexample to Ryan's view because we often ordinarily deem such decisions to be justified even if they're not based on the best available evidence.

In what follows, I'll unpack this objection, giving the example of deciding to become a mother. If Ryan were right, wisely deciding to become a mother would involve deciding it based on the preponderance of evidence available to the person expecting. Does that always happen when the decision is wise?

As a preliminary to answering this question, consider what kind of evidence would be needed. For the purposes of both Ryan's deep rationality theory of wisdom, and Paul's conception of transformative experiences, evidence should be understood in an internalist way. The sage manifests deep rationality *in foro interno* because she is *committed* to being rational: this is an overarching project of hers. Not only should one's beliefs be justified; one's commitment to their justification should make the reasoner able to come with justifications *herself* if prompted. Not only should one's thoughts and deeds cohere; one's commitment to deep rationality entails that the reasoner be able to make that coherence *transparent* to herself if the question arises. Evidence relevant to justifying one's beliefs or decisions is evidence available internally for the agent's first-personal assessment.¹

Does someone who is expecting always have this kind of evidence to support her decision? In cases of wise transformative decisions, the answer is no. As Paul (2014) describes it, undergoing a transformative experience changes our preferences in a way that often cannot be anticipated. One seldom knows beforehand—before giving birth—what one's preferences will be afterwards. When in that position, one cannot reason one's way through, starting from preferences prior to giving birth, and ending with one's preferences once one has a child. Suppose, for instance, that becoming a mother makes the child come first even if you were a party-goer and not much of a family person before. Often enough, you can't justifiably anticipate whether this will happen or not at the time when you decide whether you will keep the pregnancy.

¹ It isn't enough for evidence *to exist* in favor of holding one's beliefs or making the decisions one makes in order for one to be wise. Rather, the sage has to be *sensible* to that evidence, having some dispositions to accurately detect and weigh evidence. In addition to the reason for preferring a virtue-theoretical approach to wisdom given in Section 5, this line of thought also supports it.

Nonetheless, whenever it does occur, the change in preferences involved in motherhood is a central part of what one might call a fulfilling or flourishing life. Plausibly, the life of a sage may include the joys parenthood brings. The experience of becoming a mother might constitute what it is for a woman to lead a good life, and her becoming wiser than before. Leading to wisdom, the decision itself would be a wise one. But that decision would fail to be supported by evidence.

4. *Evidence, high stakes, and risk*

One might reply to this kind of case by insisting that the decision to keep the pregnancy is based on evidence, only not on *conclusive* evidence. The idea is that, when you decide to keep the baby, you look around, see other mothers and other women who decided to terminate their pregnancies, read some relevant literature, and decide for yourself, weighing the pros and cons. True, the evidence you would be gathering is third-personal, and may not apply to *you*. This is why the evidence is fallible—but it is evidence still. Your decision—to the extent it is a wise one—is still based on evidence.²

This reply is in the right direction. Here is what is right about it. Often, a pregnant woman has to make this hard choice on scant evidence: third-personal evidence that some mothers are happy and others aren't, and first-personal evidence about her previous behavior, more or less suited for societal stereotypes of parenthood. The would-be mother has evidence both in favor of, and against, deciding to become a mother. How, in these circumstances, would it be rational for her to act on evidence that doesn't settle the matter? And, if not rational, her decision can't be wise either—at least if the deep rationality theory of wisdom is correct.

While in the right direction, the reply ignores a crucial fact. Deciding to become a mother often endows the parent's life with new and deeper meaning, and gives the parent a sense of purpose. (Often, not always.) A *lot* is at stake in deciding to become a mother. So her decision to keep or terminate the pregnancy is a decision with *high stakes*. The most common construal of rational acts is as acts which are performed considering what is at stake. So it is rational to commensurate what is at stake with what *risks* the agent can rationally undertake. To wit, if a lot is at stake, it is rationally permissible (albeit not compulsory) to risk somewhat to get what you want.

Contrast this with evidentialism about how to justify your decisions. A decision is justified only if the evidence, on balance, supports it. This contrasts sharply with a decision taken by assuming a risk afforded by

² It is important to see that the evidence relevant here is that available to the agent at the time of making the decision to undergo a transformative experience the consequences of which cannot be fully appreciated. What one learns after undergoing that experience cannot apply, in hindsight, to decide the difficult question of which decision should be made.

the high stakes being decided on. When you risk to achieve something you deeply desire—say, the meaningfulness of parenthood—you may well do so even when the evidence available to you, on balance, doesn't support that conclusion.³

To sum up, you may decide to become a mother—and that decision may be wise—even when the evidence does not support that decision, over and above the countervailing evidence. This line of thought doesn't necessarily undermine evidentialism in general. It does undermine evidentialism as an accurate construal of what makes deeds and thoughts which underlie *wisdom* rational. If Ryan's view of wisdom as deep rationality is to be preserved, it has to give up this tenet. What can it replace it with? I will suggest that virtue theory is a good replacement as a background theory of rationality.

5. *Openness and steadfastness*

I will now argue that transformative experiences are no counterexample to Ryan's view of wisdom as deep rationality—as long as one holds a virtue-theoretical view of what rationality is. The result (e.g., Zagzebski 1996) is a picture on which overt acts and mental acts (e.g., coming to believe or to desire something new) can be given a *unified* account in point of what makes them rational. Any such performance (overt or mental) is rational inasmuch as it exercises a skill or virtue the agent has. If what is at stake is practical rationality, the relevant skills will be practical and the relevant virtues will be moral (courage, generosity, etc.). If what is at stake is theoretical rationality, the relevant skills will be cognitive and the relevant virtues will be intellectual (intellectual humility, open-mindedness, etc.) If what is at stake is rationality *tout court*, all such skills and virtues will be relevant.

In this more encompassing sense of rationality, deciding to undergo transformative experiences may indeed be rational. Which skills or virtues would be manifest in transformative experiences, to make them rational? Their rationality would be accounted for by the intellectual virtue of *openness to experience*. Openness unhinged may lead to excess, hence to vice—a far cry from what reason would recommend. But openness to experiences for which we have good though defeasible third-personal evidence that they are significant for achieving a fulfilling life, that kind of openness allows us to see deciding to undergo transformative experiences as rational.

³ Note that a friend of evidentialism might instead give up a tenet central to Ryan's deep rationality theory of wisdom, namely, that the rationality of beliefs and the rationality of decisions is to be evaluated in the same way. Evidentialists may insist their view concerns beliefs alone, not decisions too. Traditional evidentialists (e.g., Feldman and Conee 1985) may be construed this way. This reply would be to the point because the counterexamples given above all concern transformative decisions, not transformative episodes of coming to believe something new.

While a view that relates wisdom and deep rationality has to accommodate the wisdom of deciding to undergo transformative experiences, it has to also accommodate their exceptional status. And it can do so. Part of what Ryan means when she characterizes *deep* rationality is that one's commitment to self-improvement is deep—in having rational thoughts and doing rational deeds. What does such a commitment amount to? I think that such a commitment is a manifestation of steadfastness, the virtue of not wavering in front of adverse circumstances or luring experiences.

When should one be open to new experiences, and when should one hold steadfast in resisting them?⁴ The answer is uniform. We should be open to new experiences of which we have good though defeasible third-personal evidence that they are (even ever so mildly) significant for achieving a fulfilling life. We should, however, hold steadfast when confronted with the prospect of insignificant experiences—experiences which don't enhance the meaningfulness of our lives. We should hold steadfast for a simple reason: when transformative, experiences are risky (who knows who or what I will then become?). And, if they don't enhance the meaningfulness of our lives, the risk comes at no gain and should not be taken.⁵

It goes without saying that one is open to meaningful transformative experiences, or steadfast in the face of insignificant seemingly transformative experiences, given what one believes. The sage's intellectual virtues, by leading her to believe what's right, support her practical virtues in doing what's right. And, in particular, they support the virtues of making the best decision about whether to undergo a transformative experience or not—the virtues of openness and steadfastness.

6. Conclusion

I have clarified and amended what I take to be the most promising view about the nature of wisdom, that advanced by Sharon Ryan (2012). My proposal puts together two ideas I find individually promising, and mutually reinforcing: virtue theory and Ryan's theory of wisdom as deep rationality. My version of Ryan's view accounts for what makes transformative experiences *rational*, when indeed they *are* so: exercising the virtues of openness and steadfastness appropriately. It also accounts for what commitment is. Commitment is steadfastness in holding on to the patterns of thinking and acting that are worth holding on to—in light of one's first—and third-personal evidence.⁶

⁴ In delineating these options, I don't mean to deny the obvious—that one could postpone difficult choices whenever appropriate.

⁵ The idea of significance to one's life (Wolf 2010) is, of course, relative to many factors, and the decision to undergo a transformative experience ultimately depends on context. But the core idea that the sage should lead a meaningful life seems quite intuitive in full generality.

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